

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for Sunday 6th December 2020; Advent 2B

Introduction:

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people here, and all over the world, and especially family and friends who are separated from us. I invite you to use this service in whatever way is best for you. You may like to look up the hymns and read – or sing – them, or Google them and listen. If you know of anyone who would like to receive these services and is not on the list, please pass email address to Nicol or Kathryn, and please feel free to pass on hard copies to people who don't have internet access. God bless you all.

Gathering Words and Prayer

Today's reading from Isaiah begins with the words
Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

We know that, for some people, this is a difficult time of year, with little of the supposed joy and excitement of Christmas, and it is especially hard for us all this year. Yet we read about a God who will '*feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep*'. (Isaiah 40.11). As we consider the arrival of our Saviour during Advent, let us display his compassion towards those in need of comfort, tenderness and love.

Let us be still, and know the presence of God;
Pause

We thank you, Father God, that you are our shepherd, and we are your sheep. Wherever we may wander, your loving arms will find us and gather us to your bosom. Give us your patience and persistence to keep on loving, caring and hoping. Amen.

Call to worship

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our Christian fellowship, we join our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time.

Hymn (1): 273 O come O come Emmanuel
 (We used last week too, but we often use it throughout Advent)

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

In the busyness of this time of year,
 and in the added complications of this year,
 help us to remember all the people who find this time of year hard.
 When we ourselves are busy with other things, and think
 that our preparation for Christ's coming can wait, may we be ready.

When shops and internet sources offer so much,
 may we remember those who have so little.
 As we prepare our homes, and our cards and presents,
 may we also prepare our hearts to hear the voice crying in the wilderness
 and make room for God in our celebrations.

This season of Advent is about watching, waiting, longing for God.
 Amid all the problems of the pandemic,

coming on top of our other doubts and fears,
 may the clouds and the darkness be dispelled,
 so that we may awaken us to his glory, and walk in his light,
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we look increasingly towards Christmas,
 may we also look again at the story we think we know so well.
 May we have the grace to remember the true message of Christmas,
 the courage to share it with those searching or waiting for answers,
 and to open ourselves to the needs of others.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 May we praise him for the wonder of the world around us.
 May we see afresh his glory reflected in all creation
 and in the people made in his image.
 May we learn to care for our environment, our world, and its people.

As our God of faithfulness and truth
 sent his servant John the Baptist to preach in the desert
 and to summon the people to repentance,
 we remember times when we too hear that call, yet choose to ignore it,
 allowing our busy-ness, our preoccupation with our own affairs, our indecision,
 to divert us from God's purposes for us,

In these times, and in all times, may we know again
 the assurance of the renewing grace of God,
 so that, in the wilderness of our world, and in our lives,
 we may prepare a way for Jesus.

May God grant us patience to wait on his word,
 the sensitivity to hear it, the courage to act upon it,
 and the wisdom to apply it.

So may we follow more nearly in the example Jesus Christ our Lord,
 in whose words we pray:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Hymn (2): 290 The race that long in darkness pined

Readings:

Isaiah 40:1-11: Words of Hope

Comfort, O comfort my people,
 says your God.
 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
 and cry to her
 that she has served her term,
 that her penalty is paid,
 that she has received from the Lord's hand
 double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
 Every valley shall be lifted up,
 and every mountain and hill be made low;
 the uneven ground shall become level,
 and the rough places a plain.
 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
 and all people shall see it together,
 for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'
 And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
 All people are grass,
 their constancy is like the flower of the field.
 The grass withers, the flower fades,
 when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
 surely the people are grass.
 The grass withers, the flower fades;
 but the word of our God will stand for ever.
 Get you up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of good tidings;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
 lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 'Here is your God!'
 See, the Lord God comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him;
 his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.
 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead the mother sheep.

2 Peter 3: 8-15a: The Promise of the Lord's Coming

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Contemporary Reading: He comes to us as One unknown

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands: Take up your cross.

And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable [inexpressible] mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."
 - Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* p. 403.

Hymn (3): 277 Hark the glad sound!

Gospel Reading: Mark 1: 1-8: The Preaching of John the Baptist

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 "Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight"',

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Message:

On this, the second Sunday in Advent, we continue our journey towards Christmas. Advent is a time of expectation, and waiting, and looking forward. Somebody has said that, if we cut Christmas out of the Bible, we would lose about three chapters, whereas, if we remove all the references to Advent, we lose half of the Old Testament and most of the New Testament.

The Old Testament reminds us of the desert, the wilderness, the lostness of a people, and their heart-felt crying to God. You might say that, in our present circumstances, in the grip of a serious Pandemic, we too are in the wilderness. The wilderness was a place, but it was – and is- also a state of mind, a feeling of being off the beaten track, out of touch with what is going on. Maybe in Advent, as in Lent, we should be preparing ourselves for the coming Christ by 'crying out to God' with the Psalmist. It is certainly time to think about what is important to us, and to ask ourselves what it is that we are hoping for.

In 'ordinary' years, the lead up to Christmas seems to be all about rushing and buying, rather than watching and praying, which is maybe where our priority should lie.

A time of expectation and waiting. The trouble with Advent is that we think we know the end of the story: the big build-up to the joyful time of Christmas. Maybe it is hardly a "time of waiting" at all. Advertisements for Christmas gifts start in October, or even before, and, even amid the restrictions, we see all the usual commercial build-up, encouraging us to spend more money on gifts, food, drink etc. In 'ordinary' times it is a build up to an annual celebration with opportunities to meet with family and friends and have a party. Then everything gets back to 'normal' for another year. This year, as we wonder when we may get back to 'normal' I suspect that we will find a very different 'normal'.

At the beginning of his Gospel, Mark writes: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' But Mark doesn't start at the beginning. No mention of the birth of Jesus, or even of the beginning of his ministry. Instead, he begins with the preparatory work of John the Baptist. Any comfortable thoughts we might have are interrupted by this strange, hairy man, striding out of the desert, shouting about repentance, about turning away from our sins, and being baptised, and about the Holy Spirit. This is serious stuff.

Today's Bible readings all point to the beginning of a new relationship with God. All of them bring a feeling of expectation of something new, and the reassurance of God's continuing care for his people.

Right at the beginning, Mark quotes the well-known words from Isaiah: the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". (Isaiah 40:3)

Familiar words - if not because we have read them many times, or heard this passage preached so frequently, then perhaps because Handel's *Messiah* has made some of it so famous that we can hardly hear the words without hearing music as well.

Isaiah is talking about comfort and tenderness.

The people have served their sentence. They have suffered long enough, and a new era is coming. God has not forgotten his people, but the way ahead has to be prepared. It is a message of comfort and hope for a people who have been waiting too long for God to come to their rescue. It is about the coming of the Messiah, and it is about the Second Coming as well. And it tells us quite a lot about God:

1. It tells us that God is a God of justice and mercy. God will not overlook our sins, but his anger does not go on for ever. There are words of comfort and hope for the future.
2. God chooses to reveal his plans and purpose to his people. He tells them in advance what he intends to do. God makes promises.
3. God is the ultimate authority, yet he is both powerful and gentle. On the one hand, he '*comes with might*', and he will also '*gather the lambs in his arms ... and gently lead the mother sheep*'. Here is reassurance, and comfort, and encouragement.

Peter's message shows us people bewildered about the delay of Christ's return - and it is a message just as relevant to now as in Peter's day. All the other things that Jesus had said would happen, did happen fairly quickly. The early church had expected Jesus to return at any time, but now many years had passed since he said he would return.

Peter and his audience were waiting for Christ to come - not for his coming at Bethlehem but rather his coming in glory when '*the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed*'. (2 Peter 3: 10)

After nearly 2000 years we have lost that sense of urgency and expectation. Nowadays people either disregard the doctrine of the Second Coming completely, or they concentrate on it to the extent that for them it becomes the only doctrine of the Christian Faith. The Bible is quite clear that nobody knows, and nobody can predict, how and when Christ will come again. Jesus himself does not know the day or the hour when he will come again. There are things which even Jesus left without question to God himself. Surely here is a warning and a rebuke to all those who try to work out dates and timetables. I have already mentioned to you, various people who tried to do just that, and were left looking very foolish. How dare we try to enquire into something that Jesus himself was content to leave to God?

For Peter, it is enough just to know that that day is coming. His warning is especially appropriate for those of his time, and ours, who have stopped expecting. He "will come like a thief," he says. Sudden. Without warning.

His concern is not about God's timing, but rather about people's readiness - our readiness.

How can we be ready? "What sort of people ought you to be?" Peter asks. What sort of people should we be?

If you know the boss might walk into the room at any moment, what sort of worker should you be? If you know that a police officer might be in any car on the road, what sort of a driver ought you to be?

And if you know that the Lord's return, whether in a cataclysmic Day of Judgment, or on an individual basis with the end of our earthly lives, could happen on any day, what sort of a person ought you to be?

Our lives should be holy, and dedicated to God. We are to do our best to be pure and faultless in God's sight, and to be at peace with him. But there is more than that. We have to prepare! "*Prepare the way of the Lord*", Mark tells us.

Mark as we noticed, does not bother with the Christmas story – only two of the four gospel writers do - but all four speak about John the Baptist.

Mark sees John's work as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. His description of John is meant to remind us of Elijah – 'A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.' (2 Kings 1:7-8).

The Old Testament ends with the promise of Elijah's return, and of course Jesus himself confirms that John was Elijah (Matthew 17:10-13).

John's job is to "prepare the way of the Lord." He is the forerunner, the publicity agent, the MC who introduces the guest of honour. John's task of preparation is about removing obstacles - not literal mountains and rough places – but spiritual obstacles, requiring "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

Advent should be a time of anticipation, of looking forward with excitement. It is also a time of preparation, waiting for the coming of the Day of God, for the Kingdom of God, but also doing our best to make it come soon. We are not meant to be onlookers. We are meant to be participants. We, in our day, are called to "Get the road ready for the Lord"

Most births are the beginning of something. The birth that comes at the end of Advent is not the end, but the beginning. When we welcome Jesus at Christmas, we do not pack everything away until next year. We start our journey with him, watching him grow, finding out more about him, waiting to see the story unfold.

After the birth comes the ministry of Jesus, which seems to end at the cross. Then, suddenly, there is another beginning, in the resurrection, and the beginning of the Christian Community, living by the Holy Spirit.

Somebody has said that Easter begins at Advent, and Christmas lasts until Easter. At Advent, at this time of year, we remember the entry of Jesus into the world. We remember the Word that became flesh and lived among us. As we look forward, we look forward not only to Christmas, but to the New Year, and to Easter.

Without Christmas, without Jesus, there could be no Easter.
In our Christmas celebrations we remember not only the infant in the manger but the crucified and risen Christ.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 277 ~~Hark the glad sound~~

Dedication of Offering:

All that we have comes from God. We offer to him tokens of our work and our prosperity, asking that we may be blessed in the giving, and that these gifts may be blessed and that that they may be used to advance the work of Christ in the Church and in the world.
In his name we ask. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession: Let us pray:

Into cold hearts and dulled minds, where there is no peace,
Where people shout in the wilderness, where people walk in darkness
Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

In the darkness of winter, and in the darkness of the present times,
in the fears and worries of the Covid Pandemic,
Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To all who lead us:
those who make plans to contain the disease,
plans that shape or restrict our lives,
to our communities, to all who support us,
to those who are there when we need them,
give wisdom, guidance, and courage.

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To peoples and nations searching for freedom,
to individuals striving for justice,
to all who are seeking to improve the world,
or who seek to improve themselves,

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

Lord, you are ever among us.
Open our eyes to your presence,
that your church may be true to its mission,
that each congregation may proclaim your goodness,
that all of us may show forth your glory.

Lord, come among us:

Come, O come, Emmanuel.

Into our homes as we prepare for your coming,
to our loved ones, especially those separated from us;
into our work, our leisure, into our pleasures,
that they may show forth your presence:
to all who long for release, to all who are in need:
to the sick, especially Covid victims, and to those who care for them,
to all who suffer in body, mind and or spirit;

to the poor and the hungry,
 Lord, come among us:
Come, O come, Emmanuel.

To all who are oppressed and in darkness,
 the lost, the lonely and those in despair,
 to those who can no longer cope;
 to all those for whom we have special concerns today:

Pause

Lord, come among us:
Come, O come, Emmanuel.

In anticipation of Christ's coming,
 that we may know that life is eternal,
 that loved ones departed are in your keeping;
 that we may rejoice in hope,
 that we may come to your glory,
 Lord, come among us:
Come, O come, Emmanuel.

Hear us, O gracious God,
 and according to your will, grant our prayers,
 in the name of the Prince of Peace,
 Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Closing Hymn(5) 236 March on my soul with strength

Closing Words and Benediction

May the urgency, the passion and the commitment
 of John the Baptist, be reflected in the lives of us all.
 May you stay safe in the way of Christ,
 And the blessing of God almighty,
 the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
 be with you, and remain with you, now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

May God's blessing surround you each day,
 As you trust Him and walk in his way,
 May his presence within guard and keep you from sin,
 Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.